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Karen Scott

Candied Oranges, Vinegar, and Dawn: The Imagery of Conversion in the Letters of Caterina of Siena*

Between 1375 and 1380 saint Caterina of Siena, the unschooled artisan woman who became a famous lay preacher and mystic, dictated almost four hundred letters addressed to people from a variety of social classes and positions in the Church. The immediate occasion motivating her sending of letters was usually a practical matter. She advised her correspondents about how they could help advance one of her political or ecclesiastical causes: the crusade to the Holy Land, peace in Italy, the Papacy's return to Rome, or Church reform through the naming of holy rectors and bishops in the Papal states. More profoundly, however, in her letters Caterina took every opportunity to convey central lessons about conversion. Her consistent goal in sending letters was to exhort her various audiences to change their lives and to progress always further along the road to Christ-like perfection. Her *epistolario* was an essential apostolate by which she communicated to others the fruits of her own journey to God.

This article focusses on three letters which convey Caterina's conception of the Christian life during the summer of 1378, a particularly active time in her political work. The letters which concern us are L. 314 to Monna Costanza Soderini, the wife of a leading Florentine Guelph politician; L. 365 to one of Caterina's favorite Sienese disciples, Stefano Maconi; and L. 346 to the newly elected Pope Urban VI in Rome. In these letters Caterina implies that real conversion is a slow process demanding perseverance in states that are both painful and joyful and involving a combination of striving, uncertainty, and hope.[1] By examining how Caterina relayed this general message to three

* An earlier version of this article was presented at the session entitled "The Dynamics of Conversion in Late Medieval Italy" of the American Society of Church History meeting held in Washington, D.C. in December, 1992. This version has profited from the comments of colleagues and friends, especially Caroline Walker Bynum, Mark John Clark, Gregory Kozlowski, and Cynthia Polecritti, who read drafts or with whom I discussed this paper.

[1] L. 365 to Stefano Maconi has been dated May 1378; L. 314 to Monna Costanza Soderini has

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different people, we shall discern how she responded to individual needs, situations, and spiritual difficulties.

The three letters will also exemplify the variety of rhetorical strategies which made her correspondence an effective form of apostolic action, especially her creative use of symbolism and allegory. Many of the images that Caterina employed in her letters were conventional in late Medieval and early Renaissance Italian religious discourse. Inspired by Scripture, popular preaching, and devotional art, for example, she repeatedly offered the shedding of Christ's blood as the image of God's infinite love for humanity. Significantly, however, some of Caterina's most interesting imagery was her own invention. She reached into her daily experience and that of her disciples to formulate a series of metaphors which use such mundane things as vinegar and water, the dawn, and a candied orange to communicate her spiritual message. Moreover, as we shall see, her technique of joining contrasting images was particularly well-suited to presenting conversion as an ongoing process not fully completed in this life. The oxymoronic images that she created imply that it is only by accepting the paradoxical nature of the spiritual journey that one can hope to reach its happy end. Finally, the study of these three letters will enable us to make a few remarks about the mind-set of Italian believers and to begin reconstructing something of what Timothy Verdon has recently called the early Renaissance "grammar of assent" (Verdon 9).

* * *

A mystic engaged in the world, Caterina cannot be understood without a glance at the events which formed the context for those letters (Brucker, ch. 6-8; Trexler, ch. 2). In 1376 during the War of the Eight Saints, Pope Gregory XI had placed under interdict Florence and a league of allied Italian cities which included Siena. The war and the interdict continued until Gregory died in late March 1378, a year and a half after returning the Papal court from Avignon to Rome. Gregory's successor, the Italian Pope Urban VI, was elected in early April. A group of French cardinals countered Urban's election and eventually elected a rival Pope, Clement VII. Facing internal troubles of mounting magnitude, Urban sought to end the Florentine war and interdict quickly, which he succeeded in doing during July 1378. Caterina played a significant part in all of these events (Levasti, ch. 8-10; Noffke 32-34). By the winter of 1378 she and

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been dated July 1378; and L. 346 to Pope Urban VI has been dated July-August 1378. The letters are difficult to date with precise accuracy because few of the original letters and few of the letters included in manuscript collections are dated. Scholars such as Fawtier, Denis-Boulet, and Levasti have supplied the dates mentioned here. See Anodal, Getto, and Scott for studies of Catherine's style and thought; Bynum, Leclercq, and Morrison for medieval conversion, McGinn for medieval mysticism.

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her *famiglia* of spiritual disciples and friends had already gained substantial experience in public affairs. Inspired by what she believed was a divine call to honor God and help save souls through travel and informal preaching about peace, Church reform, and the Christian life, in the spring of 1376 she had gone from Siena to Florence to speak with government officials about ending their war with the Papacy, and then she had traveled to Avignon to attempt a mediation between Gregory and the Florentines. This first peacemaking venture failed, but Caterina probably had a role in convincing the Pope to move his court from Avignon to Rome. In 1377 Caterina led through the Sienese countryside a preaching mission officially sanctioned by Gregory XI. During the autumn of 1377, exhausted by her apostolic activities, she rested, prayed, and dictated a first draft of her major theological and mystical treatise, *Il dialogo della divina provvidenza.* In the winter of 1378 the Pope's strategy for ending the war with Florence included calling on her to serve again as peacemaker. Caterina resided in Florence for several months, continuing work on the *Dialogo* and laboring through spoken advice, the sending of letters, and apostolic prayer until the peace was finally concluded between the city and Urban VI. Then she probably returned hurriedly to Siena at the onset of the Ciompi revolt in late July. During the late summer and the autumn, news of mounting dissatisfaction with, and rebellion against, Urban VI began to trickle in. In November 1378 Caterina would leave Siena again for the last time, called to Rome by Urban to help counter the Schism. She died on April 29, 1380.

As we shall see, though the three letters studied here are not directly political in content, unlike many others that she sent, they do reflect in a variety of ways Caterina's involvement in the events of 1378. Caterina discusses these circumstances directly or refers to them indirectly because they are forcing her correspondents to face and make difficult decisions that regard their spiritual lives. She employs imagery of war and peace that her friends understand immediately because of their shared experience of the war. In addition, though Caterina's three letters focus on the moral and spiritual issues that she believes her correspondents most need to work on for the salvation of their souls, she foresees political and ecclesiastical consequences to their conversions. In Caterina's view, inner change related to one's love for God always has positive effects on the external world of one's social relations and love for neighbor; conversely, one's service to others manifests the quality of one's relationship with God and helps to perfect it (Scott, "Love of God and Neighbor").

Moreover, these letters present Christian conversion in ways that mirror the optimism, the difficulties, and the joys that Caterina was experiencing in Florence while she was laboring on the peace. The first two of the three letters convey her hopeful state of mind in May and June, when the peace was not settled but was appearing increasingly probable. The third letter addressed to Urban VI was sent from Siena soon after the long-awaited peace had been joyfully concluded, when his difficulties in Rome were not as yet very great, and

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Caterina was hopeful about his potential as a Church reformer.

Caterina's confidence in the face of negative circumstances is the attitude which links her peacemaking, her fostering of conversion, and her thinking about the Christian life in general. Florence was caught in an evil war which she was certain God would bring to an end, in part at least through her mediation. Likewise, though she affirms that the difficulties encountered by her correspondents are jeopardizing their salvation and need to be addressed, still, she trusts that genuine conversion is within reach for all people, because such is God's good pleasure. Ordinary lay men and women, as well as Popes, will find that the path to Christ is open to them, if they will but follow the practical guidelines which she sets out in her letters. Caterina's optimism about the ultimately positive outcome of her work as peacemaker and as preacher of conversion is remarkable, given that her goals were far from realized at the time of her sending these letters. The peace process had begun, but the war was not over; and though her disciples were starting to seek God, they were not yet sufficiently converted to her satisfaction. Underlying Caterina's optimism was her sense that the peacemaker who trusts in God can find true joy in working to construct a peace, even though this peace is not yet fully visible. Likewise, the spiritual teacher who is encouraging a recalcitrant disciple to shift perspective more completely from self to Christ can have full confidence in the effectiveness of God's action on the disciple both now and in the future, even though she detects only mediocre results as yet.

More generally, in the summer of 1378 Caterina saw the entire Christian life in a way that paralleled her work as peacemaker and spiritual director: she describes the path to God as a sometimes painful experience of the "not yet" which becomes joyful when the waiting is founded on hope in God. However strong the converted person's desire for God and spiritual perfection may be, she implies, it will remain to some degree unfulfilled on this earth. Though at times God may grant the mystic in training small glimpses of the glory that is to come in heaven, and though genuine changes and real progress do occur in the spiritual life, in practice converted persons find themselves in a variety of places between undesirable and desirable extremes. The Christian's daily existence sets her or him somewhere between sin and virtue, between unbelief and complete faith in divine mercy, between death and the fullness of life, and between disregard for God and a lasting, satisfying union with His infinite love. Among the essential prerequisites to spiritual progress, Caterina says, the soul needs to cultivate a realistic acceptance of this intermediary situation and a hopeful trust that God is working to bring about the desired goal of union with Him through that intermediary situation. For Caterina, the key to persevering in this joyful and painful waiting for God is to focus on Christ and develop the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Caterina explained her view of the spiritual life most completely throughout her book, the *Dialogo*, which she was thinking about and revising during the

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summer of 1378. There she portrays the entire Christian life as a pilgrimage. Having decided to leave sin behind, the pilgrims take union with God the Father as their end. The path of their pilgrimage is Christ Himself, whom Caterina sees also as the Bridge linking God to sinful humanity at the Incarnation and making it possible for humanity to walk back to God, to be repeatedly forgiven its sins, and to be granted eternal salvation. The pilgrim's progress in the journey on the Bridge is fueled by the joyful and patient expectation of something which exists already to a degree, but which has still to be perfected: the very life of Christ within the believer. The letters which Caterina dictated during the summer of 1378 present the Christian life as a pilgrimage too, but there she relies on a variety of imagery better suited to the needs of each letter's recipient.

* * *

The letter to Monna Costanza Soderini (5:24-28) addresses this woman's particular problem, which was the excessive fear of death and damnation caused by despair over the gravity of her sins; and Caterina proposes that she strive instead for the opposite virtues of penance and faith in God's mercy. Using Pauline language to describe what Costanza's full conversion will mean (Col. 3:9-10), Caterina tells her to take off self-love and servile fear, put on Christ crucified, and return to God. Caterina suggests further that Costanza's hope in the divine mercy ought to sustain her not only if her heart finds all worldly things tedious and displeasing and if she truly has put on Christ, that is, if she is already leading a fully converted life. The main point of the letter is that Costanza should also trust God now, in her current imperfect situation between sin and virtue, even if she should happen to die before doing sufficient penance for her sins. Caterina does not mention what particular circumstances caused Costanza's fear of death. However, one assumes that Costanza, whose husband Niccolò Soderini was one of the most important Guelph leaders of Florence, may have had good reason to fear premature or sudden death during the summer of 1378, when the War of the Eight Saints and the difficult peace process were causing many serious political and social upheavals in the city. Caterina wants to reassure Costanza that dying in the intermediate state between sin and perfection would not be a threat to her salvation, so long as she places all her hope in God now.

To make her point Caterina leads Costanza step by step through a confession to God. This is a model prayer meant to teach Costanza how to overcome her temptation of despair and her fear of death by turning with trust to Christ:

> Convienci dunque ponere rimedio a tanta malizia del dimonio, e rispondere a sé medesimo a queste cogitazioni che gli vengono, vollendo l'occhio al suo Creatore; e dire: "Io confesso che son mortale; la qual cosa m'è a grandissima grazia, perocché per la morte io giugnerò al mio fine, cioè a

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> Dio, il quale è la mia vita. Ed anco confesso che la vita mia, con le opere che io ho fatte, non meritano altro che l'inferno. Ma io ho fede e speranza nel mio Creatore e nel sangue del consumato e svenato Agnello, che mi perdonerà li miei peccati, e darammi la sua Grazia. E io m'ingegnerò di correggere la vita mia per lo tempo presente".
>
> (26)

Costanza is caught between the realization that a just God should send her to hell for her sins and the inner conviction that her only goal is the eternal life of union with God in heaven. Given these circumstances, Caterina teaches, Costanza's only option is to stop listening to the demonic voice of despair and to address her Creator. She need to admit her failings to God, to believe in divine forgiveness, to develop faith and hope in Christ's blood, and to attempt to change her life.

In addition to providing a model confession of sin and profession of faith, Caterina gives Costanza advice also about how to imagine and understand properly her current intermediary state between sin and faith. She writes that sin and divine mercy may well continue to coexist in her life, but that this should not be a cause of despair. All of the world's sins are like less than one drop of vinegar in the midst of the sea. Though real and serious, Costanza's sins are insignificant as compared to the infinite magnitude of God's love:

> Se tutti li peccati che si possono commettere fossero raunati in una creatura, sono meno che una gocciola d'aceto in mezzo al mare. Or così sono li peccati rispetto della divina misericordia, purché l'anima voglia ritornare a riceverla con vera e santa disposizione, e con dispiacimento della colpa commessa; nel quale dispiacimento perde la tenerezza del corpo suo, e ogni cosa creata.
>
> (26)

Just as the vinegar remains intact in the sea, so sin may not be totally obliterated by divine mercy as of yet. Still, as the soul realizes that the power of God's love is so incommensurably greater than her own sin, she learns how relatively unimportant sin, the flesh, and all created things actually are, and she is eased into conversion and sorrow for her faults. Caterina suggests that it is only by accepting the paradox of being in the intermediary state that includes simultaneously sin, penance, and trust in God's great mercy that one can be comforted and gain the strength to make further progress toward holiness. Caterina concludes this section of the letter with a glowing description of what the soul who is experiencing the ambiguous and difficult state symbolized by the vinegar and sea imagery may expect to become if she remains faithfully in that state:

> A questo modo l'anima s'assicura, e cresce lo amore nel Fine suo; e perde il

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> timore servile della confusione, e dilettasi con grandissima giocondità col diletto suo Cristo crocifisso, aspettando con grandissima letizia e riposo l'ora della morte. E non tanto che l'aspetti, ma desidera di vedersi levare dal mondo, ed esser con Cristo. Orsù dunque, figliuola mia dolce, non più timore! Ma con letizia passate questo punto del tempo, con uno desiderio della virtù, e con vera pazienzia. . . .
>
> (26)

Caterina foresees a future time of further conversion, when Costanza will become confident enough in God to live with inner peace in this place between sin and perfection, and between life and death. From faith and hope, her love for Christ crucified will grow, and the waiting for God will become a delight and a joy. Finally, the soul will begin to yearn for the death that brings her final and complete union with God. Caterina implies that this state of yearning for death and full union with God is as close to perfection as the soul can hope to reach in this life. She challenges her lay female disciple to seek this, the highest level of spiritual attainment possible, through the patient and joyful acceptance of her current danger and her uncertain status between sinner and saint.

The last section of the letter is, appropriately, a eulogy of time as the divine gift that characterizes human life in this world and the soul's struggle in the intermediary state between sin and perfection. Shifting to economic imagery, the author calls time a treasure which should not be buried or wasted, but put to good use for the acquisition of eternal life (27). Caterina ends her letter with a message on the value of time addressed to two people whose identity is uncertain, *la fanciulla* and Monna Nera, and to Costanza's politician husband Niccolò: "E ditegli che sappiano furare il tempo, e spenderlo con vero e santo desiderio, mentre che l'hanno" (28). Caught for now within the contingent and limited confines of time, Caterina implies, her correspondents need both to accept the difficult reality of leading a spiritual life on earth within time, and to nurture their desire for virtue, God, and eternity in heaven.

* * *

Caterina's letter to her close Sienese friend and disciple Stefano Maconi (5:252-57) differs from the letter to Monna Costanza Soderini in the greater frequency, length, and directness of its references to specific personal and public matters. Comments on the war in Tuscany, on ecclesiastical problems, and on details of several people's lives make up the second half of Stefano's letter, whereas only the few lines quoted above from the very end of the letter to Costanza mention specific things and individuals. The more concrete character of Stefano's letter, as compared to Costanza's, might be explained by his deeper involvement in public affairs as a man from a prominent noble family, and by his closer connection to Caterina as a Sienese disciple. Moreover, this is also one of the eight letters by

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Caterina whose original manuscript has survived: while we can read in their entirety the words she sent to Stefano, we know Caterina's other letters, like the one to Monna Costanza, only through manuscript collections in which the texts seem to be incomplete. Unfortunately for Caterina scholars, late fourteenth-century editors of her *epistolario* excised many of the end-sections where she had inserted discussions of practical matters, perhaps because they assumed these mundane things would not be spiritually edifying (Noffke 9-13). Having the longer, unexpurgated version of Caterina's letter to Stefano Maconi allows us to see better how she adapted her message to his concrete needs.

Caterina addresses several matters of public concern that affect Stefano's spiritual life. The war between the Florentine League and the Papacy and the effect of the Papal interdict on the Sienese church are central issues in this letter. In particular, she warns Stefano to avoid attending Mass and receiving the sacraments. He had requested her advice about a subterfuge used to circumvent the interdict. The practice involved attaching oneself, theoretically and temporarily, to the household of someone, like a certain Messer Jacomo, who was exempt from the interdict. Caterina responds that such compromises with the truth are wrong. One either serves someone as part of his household, or one does not, and clearly Stefano does not serve Messer Jacomo: "Ché noi sappiamo pure, che, perché io mi faccio titolo d'essere suo fameglio, io pure non sono né voglio essere" (255). Rather than take advantage of an artificial loophole, Caterina says, Stefano and her disciples ought to be humble and obedient, stay away from the sacraments, and wait with patience for the time of peace.

In addition, the letter asks Stefano to take care of several practical matters that concern Caterina's *famiglia* of disciples and friends. She entrusts him, her head disciple in Siena, with a number of messages for other Sienese members of her group. She conveys to him affectionate messages from *famiglia* members who are with her in Florence. She also tells him to look into the status of monies that were sent for a horse, but that never arrived at their destination. And Stefano is to arrange for Caterina's *Libro* (the *Dialogo*) to be sent to her in Florence, so she can revise it.

Beyond these relatively mundane matters, however, the letter focusses on personal problems related to Stefano's family and his religious vocation. Caterina wishes to free Stefano from an excessive attachment to his relatives, whom she calls *nimici domestici* and accuses of seeking only their own self-interest and not what is best for him. In contrast, she recommends detaching from family, letting the dead bury their dead, and following Christ (Luke 9:60). She wants Stefano eventually to take the drastic step of leaving his mother and father in Siena and joining her *famiglia* in Florence to seek God and to work for peace with the Papacy. While she vigorously encourages him to free himself of family ties in order to bind himself solely to Christ, however, she realizes also that leaving Siena immediately would cause a great upheaval, what she calls "scandalo e turbazione del padre e della madre" (255). As a result, Caterina

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specifies that he should come to work for public peace with her in Florence only if he can do so personally "in pace" (256): that is, if the scandal ceases, and his parents give him permission to leave. In the meantime, though Stefano is upset by many contradictory thoughts about his familial and vocational choices, he should be content to stay in Siena and he should be comforted in the midst of the waiting and the turmoil.

Stefano's current experience in Siena, according to Caterina, involves several kinds of waiting. Deprived of such objectively salutary consolations as attending Mass and enjoying the company of friends who strengthen him in the spiritual life, he is tempted to seek unethical, quick, and easy remedies to his pain. She wants him to resist the impulse to satisfy his desire for God in inappropriate ways. Instead, he should scrupulously keep the interdict, obey his parents, live with his contradictory thoughts, and find God in the waiting for peace and family approval.

To kindle in Stefano a more mature desire for God, Caterina develops language far more complex than the imagery of the drop of vinegar in the sea used in her letter to Monna Costanza. Here a recent unexpected event in Stefano's life triggered in her a similarly didactic, but more playful and elaborate exegetical response. Caterina was inspired to invent for her correspondent an entirely original meditation linking aspects of his experience to several spiritual meanings. Apparently Stefano had written to Caterina that he was taken prisoner by highway robbers in broad daylight, and then at God's instigation he was miraculously released by these enemies at dawn, at the time between night and day. Caterina clearly relished the allegorical potential of these events. Wishing to render more effective her suggestions about conversion to Christ and the need to wait patiently in Siena for now, Caterina sends Stefano a rich assortment of explanations for what the images of night, day, and dawn might mean.

First Caterina contrasts day and night, and she advises Stefano that night is the best time in which to be. She tells him to protect himself from the enemies of his soul by seeking to remain in the night of true self-knowledge and humility:

> Pensaci, dolcissimo figliuolo, che, mentre che tu starai nella notte del vero cognoscimento di te, tu non sarai mai preso: ma se la propria passione volesse passare col dì del proprio sensitivo amore; o l'anima volesse passare prima al dì del cognoscimento di Dio, che alla notte del cognoscimento di sé; sarebbe presa da' nemici suoi.
>
> (253)

Day is associated here with self-love, the giving of priority to physical passions, and spiritual presumption (to focus too early on God's love without the requisite foundation in self-knowledge). These are vices that would lead to Stefano's ultimate downfall, his surrender to the enemies of the soul. In contrast, Caterina

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associates the image of night with spiritual safety, achieved through the humble confession and acceptance of one's sinfulness. Just as Stefano was taken prisoner during the day but was safe at night, so to keep moving forward on his journey to God he should treasure a consciousness of the lowly reality of who he is, working at overcoming his sinful tendencies. Significantly, whereas Caterina's letter to Monna Costanza seeks to rescue her from the temptation to despair about her salvation because her sins seem too great and she fears death, the letter to Stefano directs him to beware of the opposite danger, the temptation to believe that he is more advanced than he really is in the path to God.

Next, with a gleeful shift in interpretation, Caterina suggests that the best time in which to be is neither the night of self-knowledge, nor the day, which she now translates as a positive thing, the knowledge of God's goodness. Instead, the time Stefano needs to live in is the dawn, that hopeful prelude to day which contains elements of both night and day but seems less satisfying than either the full night or the full day. In her first interpretation of the dawn, Caterina explains it is a spiritual state including both humility and awareness of God's great love for the soul. To avoid the dangers of presumption and despair, both of which lead to the loss of spiritual freedom, it is necessary to live happily in the intermediary situation between day and night that is symbolized by the dawn:

> Or non ha dubbio, che, se l'anima con ansietato e dolce desiderio non sta nel cognoscimento di sé, e della bontà di Dio in sé; e' si troverebbe menato preso [sic] da' nemici di Dio. Subito il nemico della presunzione col legame della superbia, le passioni e le delizie e stati del mondo, il demonio e la carne, tutti ci piglierebbero. E però voglio che sempre tu riposi tra il dì e la notte; cioè cognoscendo te in Dio, e Dio in te.
>
> (253)

The formula "cognoscendo te in Dio, e Dio in te" is one that Catherine repeated often in her correspondence and that Stefano would have recognized and understood well. What she means by this formula and her reference to resting between day and night in the dawn is that Stefano can avoid despair over his own shortcomings and the trials of his spiritual journey by focussing with faith and hope on God's infinite love for him, as manifested in his soul's noble creation in the divine image and likeness, and in his re-creation and redemption in Christ's blood. At the same time Stefano can avoid presumption by realizing how much he needs divine grace, given the radical fact that his own being cannot even exist without God. To hold simultaneously the very great dignity of the soul and the utter nothingness of the soul is the difficult challenge proposed here. Caterina warns that if Stefano ever steps out of this dawn, the enemies of his soul will be victorious over him. To abide in God, he will have to rest "always" in this dawn.

Caterina continues her exegesis of the dawn by suggesting several other

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equally important interpretations. To explain that Stefano will be able to overcome his current mental and emotional turmoil only if he first accepts it humbly as God's will, she tells him that living in the dawn means welcoming pain with hope:

> Allora troverai, che, se i nemici t'avessino legato, e ingombrato il cuore di molti e vari pensieri, riceverà il cuore l'aurora; saratti detto dentro nell'anima tua, e tu il dirai ancora: "Vatti in pace, e riposati in pace in su la mensa della croce, dove troverai la pace e la quiete, stando nel mare tempestoso". Quanta pace vi fu, quando a voi, agnelli in mezzo di que' lupi, fu detto da loro: andatevi in pace! Essendo anco tra la guerra loro, gustaste la pace, quando l'udiste. E così ti pensa, che, quando l'anima si sente presa con molti e diversi pensieri, ella si conforma colla volontà di Dio. Vedendo con quanto amore egli le 'l concede, e quanto ci fanno venire a più perfetta sollicitudine e vera umiltà; vi trova la pace, essendo ancora nel tempo della guerra.
>
> (253)

Just as Stefano was freed by his wicked captors at the moment of dawn, when a kind of dawn entered their hearts, so he will be freed from his spiritual enemies, the troublesome thoughts and emotions he is suffering at the moment due to his frustrated desire to leave Siena and join Caterina's group in Florence, only when a new kind of dawn enters into his heart. Paradoxically, if he wishes to be freed from his pain he will first have to welcome it as Christ did the cross. He will have to learn that his current suffering of unfulfilled desire is a gift from God's love, and he will have to trust that all that he is undergoing is serving the utterly good purpose of fostering his continuing conversion. More perfect solicitude in the pursuit of holiness and God will be his only if he accepts to rest now in the intermediary position between meaningless pain and complete joy symbolized by the dawn.

This dawn represents a spiritual state that seems initially impossible to sustain, like finding peace while dying on a cross, navigating on a stormy sea, or fighting in the midst of a war. Caterina underlines the difficulty of living in this dawn by her frequent repetition of war and peace language. Because she does not resolve the contrast between the opposites of war and peace through some intermediate word that would contain them both simultaneously (she speaks only of "pace, essendo ancora nel tempo della guerra"), she implies that being in the dawn does involve painful tension, not unlike her own state of patient waiting for the peace to be settled in Florence. Caterina's point, however, is not the value of suffering as an end in itself. Her decision to focus on dawn imagery also conveys a message of hope, since dawn leads inevitably to day in the natural order of things. She is assuring Stefano that by accepting to endure his unfulfilled desire with trust in God he will eventually pass through the pain to greater joy. And just as he was freed by the highway robbers, Caterina promises,

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so his soul will be freed from his spiritual enemies, particularly his bothersome thoughts and feelings, and he will find genuine peace and union with God.

Later in the letter Caterina shifts to another one of her goals, to encourage Stefano to detach from family ties and follow Christ more single-mindedly. There the image of dawn takes on a third meaning, which holds the less positive connotation of a temporary state of indecision between the night of unbelief and the bright sunlit day of full conversion. She certainly hopes that eventually he will be able to leave Siena and his relatives, the *nemici domestici*, to lead a more intensive form of the spiritual life with her spiritual *famiglia*. What she wants him to do now, however, is to persevere in the intermediary state between the two types of family he is considering and to be comforted with hope:

> Quando tu sarai diliberato da loro, escito fuore di prigione; sarà levato il sole. Ora se' nell'aurora, che anco ben bene non ti lassa gustare né discernere la virtù, perché non se' ancora nel tempo del sole; che tu sia sciolto da questi nemici domestici. Ma io voglio, carissimo figliuolo, che tu ti conforti ora in questo tempo dell'aurora; perché tosto ne verrà il sole, udiremo quella dolce parola: "Lassa i morti seppellire a' morti, e tu mi seguita". Altro non ti dico sopra questo fatto. Annègati nel sangue di Cristo crocifisso, acciò che i nemici non ti trovino più. Or non dormire nel letto della negligenzia, e vènti sciogliendo tosto, acciò che meglio ti possa legare.
>
> (254)

The variety of interpretations which Caterina proposes for the image of the dawn as intermediary between day and night allows her to teach her disciple Stefano about the conversion she is expecting him to undergo. She wants him to develop more humility, to balance consciousness of his own sinfulness with trust in God's love, and to resist his tendency to avoid all painful waiting. The acceptance of a series of painful paradoxes with hope in Christ's blood is key to progressing and persevering in the spiritual life. Caterina's allegory of the highway robbers' incident and the various times of day, night, and dawn is meant to help Stefano understand, and grow in his desire for, such a true conversion. Relating her difficult lesson about pain and joy to a recent traumatic event that had a happy ending makes that lesson clearer, easier to remember and meditate on, and more pleasant to practice than would a direct exposition of ascetic and mystical theology. A similar theme and a similar rhetorical strategy characterize the third letter by Caterina considered here, the one to Pope Urban VI.

* * *

The letter to Urban exhorts him also to conversion (5:161-64). He needs to turn away from the perverse pain and bitterness he is experiencing because of adverse circumstances. Caterina mentions without further elaboration a certain "caso

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occorso per li malvagi e iniqui uomini amatori di loro medesimi" (164) as the occasion for the Pope's evil bitterness. Caterina opposes indulging in the bitterness that afflicts and dries up the soul and arises from a selfishness without charity, to the bearing of a sweet bitterness that feeds the soul and enables it to suffer with charity for the salvation of others. For Urban conversion will mean overcoming the self-love which underlies his feelings of anger and disappointment at the *caso*, feeling sorrow over his own sins and those of others, and developing a courageous desire to reform the Church despite the persecutions and tribulations such a task will entail.

Caterina informs the Pope that it is God's will for him to become "Christ's vicar" not only in name, but in the reality of his life:

> Pare, santissimo Padre, che questa Verità eterna voglia far di voi un altro lui; e sì perché sete vicario suo Cristo in terra, e sì perché nell'amaritudine e nel sostenere vuole che reformiate la dolce Sposa sua e vostra, che tanto tempo è stata impallidita. . . . Ora è venuto il tempo che egli vuole che per voi, suo istrumento, sostenendo le molte pene e persecuzione, ella sia tutta rinovata. Di questa pena e tribolazione ella n'escirà come fanciulla purissima, tagliatone ogni vecchio e rinovellato nell'uomo nuovo.
>
> (162-63)

Caterina goes on to express her hope that the cause of Urban's pain will be removed; but in the meantime, she advises, he must remember his own nothingness and place his trust exclusively in Christ. Caterina's ideal is a Pope who allows God to make him into "another Christ" with the willingness to suffer for the conversion of a "pallid" Church. The unfortunate reality, however, was that Urban was prone to excesses of anger, what she called in another letter to him (L. 364) "movimenti sùbiti, che la natura vi porge" (5:250). Caterina writes here to foster in him another kind of movement, from natural anger to supernatural charity, and to encourage him to help purify the Church in the "new man" and restore the Church to her original state as a "pure young girl."

Instead of using as the basis for her letter a recent event in the life of her disciple, as she could do more appropriately with someone like Stefano whom she knew well and corresponded with often, in the Pope's case Caterina actually created the object of her allegorizing, a candied orange, and sent it to him with her letter (Levasti 377). Caterina followed a recipe for candied oranges that may have been well-known in the fourteenth century, for it is fairly close to the recipe for *orangat* which her near contemporary, the anonymous middle-aged man who authored the *Mesnagier de Paris*, included in this book to instruct his young wife on how to keep a household and lead a devout life (796-99). One can see how well-suited a recipe was for Caterina's didactic purpose: as a short "how to" set of instructions for transforming simple ingredients into more palatable foods, a recipe was an ideal vehicle for conveying messages about conversion.

Caterina's recipe for candied oranges called for replacing the bitterness of

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medieval oranges with edible bitter-sweetness. She implies that one must first scoop out the bitter pulp, then soak and boil the orange peel in water, fill the shell with good things mixed with honey, and finally cover the candied orange with gold:

> Siccome alcuna volta io ho veduto che la melarancia, che in sé pare amara e forte, trattone quello che v'è dentro, e mettendola in mollo, l'acqua ne trae l'amaro; poi si riempie con cose confortative, e di fuore si copre d'oro. E dove n'è ito quello amaro che nel suo principio con fadiga se la poneva l'uomo in bocca? Nell'acqua e nel fuoco.
>
> (163)

Next, Caterina interprets the candied orange recipe as an allegory for the steps of the Pope's conversion. As in her other letters, she suggests that Christ's blood will be the sole active agent of Urban's movement from self-love to the many virtues and the spirit of service that characterize true holiness:

> Così, santissimo Padre, l'anima che concipe amore alla virtù, nel primo entrare gli pare amaro, perché è anco imperfetta; ma vuolsi ponere il rimedio del sangue di Cristo crocifisso, il quale sangue dà un acqua di Grazia, che ne trae ogni amaritudine della propria sensualità; amaritudine dico affligitiva, come detto è. E perché sangue non è senza fuoco, perocché fu sparto con fuoco d'amore; puossi dire (e così è la verità) che il fuoco e l'acqua ne tragga l'amaro, vuotasi di quella che prima v'era, cioè dell'amore proprio di sé; poi l'ha riempito d'uno conforto di fortezza con vera perseveranzia, e con una pazienzia intrisa con mèle di profonda umiltà, serrato nel cognoscimento di sé; perché nel tempo dell'amaritudine l'anima meglio conosce sé e la bontà del suo Creatore.
>
> (163-64)

Like the water in which the orange soaks and boils, Christ's blood and its attendant water of grace and fire of divine love will draw all perverse bitterness out of the Pope. In the first stage of conversion, the person who soaks in the divine love symbolized by, and made effective in, Christ's blood is emptied of all that was there "before" (*prima*): the selfish self's attachment to ease, its fear of pain and responsibility, and all that caused its immature and bitter reaction to hardship. In the second stage (*poi*), the Pope will experience more and more fully the pain of his own sinfulness, of life's struggles, and of his difficult apostolate, and he will be filled by God with such objectively comforting and honeyed virtues as fortitude, perseverance, patience, and humility. Just as the candying process does not entirely neutralize the bitterness of the orange, however, so the presence of these sweet virtues in the soul will not remove all the Pope's pain. Rather, by allowing his bitter experience to help him focus better on his own nothingness and God's goodness, he will be enabled to face and bear that pain, whatever it is, with trust in God. Caterina stresses that it is the decision to

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accept this bitterness that will be make the Pope's life ultimately sweet. She makes this point forcefully: "Come l'anima ha deliberato in sé di volere sostenere infino alla morte per Cristo crocifisso e per amore della virtù, così [il frutto] diventa dolce" (163).

Caterina ends her exegesis of the recipe by explaining the meaning of the gold wrapping around the orange. Once the Pope is filled with Christ, she says, his virtues will become brightly visible to others, and he will bear much fruit in his apostolate. Urban will manifest gentle humility, purity, charity, and patience far removed from the perverse bitterness with which he began:

> Pieno e richiuso questo frutto, apparisce l'oro di fuora, che tiene fasciato ciò che v'è dentro. Questo è l'oro della purità, col lustro dell'affocata carità, il quale esce di fuora, manifestandosi in utilità del prossimo suo con vera pazienzia, portando costantemente con mansuetudine cordiale; gustando solo quella dolce amaritudine che doviamo avere, di dolerci dell'offesa di Dio e danno dell'anime. Or così dolcemente produceremo frutto senza la perversa amaritudine. . . E la S.V., e noi matureremo li frutti delle virtù nella memoria del sangue di Cristo crocifisso, con vera umiltà, come detto è; cognoscendo noi non essere, ma l'essere e ogni grazia posta sopra l'essere avere da lui. Così compirete in voi la volontà di Dio, e il desiderio dell'anima mia.
>
> (164)

Caterina's gift of the candied orange is an elaborate representation of what Urban's soul will be like once the divine Cook is finished with him. Though the bitterness of the orange has been alleviated through the soaking in water and the adding of honey, the finished product of the recipe is not pure sweetness, but what she calls a "sweet bitterness." In seeking to be useful to his neighbor by reforming the Church, the converted Urban will surely encounter many bitter difficulties and persecutions. Rather than focus on his old fear of suffering and his anger which "dry up" his soul, however, he will experience now a nurturing kind of bitterness. By recognizing his own lack of being without God, by admitting his own limitations and sins, and by grieving over how much the unreformed Church and the damnation of souls dishonor God, he will develop into a fully mature Christian whose suffering in the apostolate is at once painful, sweet, and fruitful. He will truly become "un altro Cristo."

* * *

To conclude, one may ask what these three letters about conversion tell us about Caterina's religious mentality in the summer of 1378. She assumes that spiritual change is necessary and possible for all kinds of people, including lay women, lay men, and even Popes. Beyond possible differences in ecclesiastical status and gender, for her conversion is always a shift from an evil to a good

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which involves divine grace and great human effort. Caterina's role as a spiritual writer is to draw a road map to explain in practice how her various correspondents' difficulties and sins can be overcome, but she also insists that a full shift from evil to good, from self to Christ, or from bitterness to sweetness, cannot be perfectly effected in this life. The soul is placed in a state of tension, of unresolved desire, of yearning and hungering for something that is not yet entirely present. It is essential that the soul be reassured that the waiting for God is not in vain, that the suffering is productive, that change is occurring, and that what is not yet entirely present will surely come.

The means by which Caterina seeks to communicate this message effectively is imagery and allegory. The sweet bitterness of the orange, dawn between night and day, peace in the midst of war, the vinegar in the sea — these images which mix together and juxtapose opposites suggest that though living in that state of unresolved desire is not easy, the path to God makes sense and can be traveled with a certain kind of joy. Significantly, Caterina does not claim to have received these images through supernatural visions; neither does she base them primarily on Scriptural or other literary models. Rather, in drawing her allegories from ordinary life, current events, and her imagination and in giving them profound religious meanings, she endows simple things, the paradoxes of human existence, and her own creativity with very great dignity.

Caterina's particular way of linking this world to God is part of what makes her an early Renaissance writer and mystic. For her the ultimate goal of human life is entirely otherworldly, and God can be reached only through death to the selfish self and the world. At the same time, for Caterina the path to God and heaven also passes obligatorily through a certain kind of acceptance of this earthly existence. Pilgrims who accept with confidence in God the painful reality of their imperfect virtue and unfulfilled desire will speed ahead toward perfection and true happiness more easily and certainly. Caterina believes also that the hardships and the joys of loving one's neighbor, of engaging in an apostolate, and of paying close attention to potentially worldly things, such as family matters, war and peace negotiations, and the politics of Church reform, are necessary for the individual's growth in holiness. For Caterina and her contemporaries, engaging in such external activities does not hinder inner growth, but fosters deeper conversion and union with God. On this earth, the mystic neither leads the angelic life nor experiences purely transcendent Being. Rather, as Caroline Bynum suggests, God can be reached by sinking more fully into the "ordinary experience of physical and social vulnerability" (274). The early Renaissance "grammar of assent" meant waiting for God with both pain and hope, drawing nearer to Him through concrete things and events, and accepting fully the complexity and paradoxes of human existence.

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By the end of the summer of 1378, Caterina's confidence in God seemed to have been justified. The peace was proclaimed. The interdict ended. A new reformer Pope had been elected. Shortly thereafter, however, schism and war were plaguing the Church once again, and it seems fitting that Caterina died working and praying for, but not seeing yet, the happy resolution of these problems. Neither could she be certain about whether her efforts to convert Monna Costanza Soderini, Stefano Maconi, and Pope Urban VI had been fruitful or not. With the hindsight of history, we know that Stefano later became a Carthusian monk and was beatified by the Church; Urban remained bitter and went mad; I do not know what happened to Monna Costanza. But one imagines that Caterina died with hope for them all and confidence in God, following her famous maxim: "L'anima mia nel dolore gode ed esulta, perocché tra le spine sente l'odore della rosa che è per aprire" (2: 262).

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